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Letter dated 29 November 2000 from the Permanent Representative of Ethiopia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

With reference to the letter from the Chargé d'affaires a.i. of Eritrea, dated 17 November 2000, and its annex issued as document A/55/630-S/2000/1101, I have the honour on behalf of the Government of Ethiopia to state the following:

On 17 November 2000, the Security Council met to discuss and review the situation between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The Council, having considered the matter between the two countries, came out later with a number of very useful, constructive and confidence-building measures on which both parties to the conflict could agree. Ethiopia welcomes these measures and regards them as timely. However, on that same day, the Permanent Mission of Eritrea to the United Nations chose to circulate a statement of its Foreign Ministry as a document of the Security Council and the General Assembly. The statement, more than anything else, showed the extent to which Eritrea would not only deny the follies it is involved in, but would go further by twisting what others may or may not have said.

It is not the intention of the Government of Ethiopia to continue being engaged in an unhealthy dialogue of the deaf with Eritrea. We want to seize the opportunity of the new climate of peace presented to both countries and the entire Horn of Africa region. It is Ethiopia's intention to work, as the statement by the President of the Security Council of 21 November 2000 stressed, "... to conclude without delay a final and comprehensive peace settlement". We also believe that the deployment of the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) would contribute to a positive climate for a final and comprehensive peace agreement. It is our fervent wish also that the presence of UNMEE will be used to enable both countries to agree on the delimitation and demarcation of the border in the shortest possible time.

Responding to the call by the Security Council for taking some confidence-building measures, Ethiopia yesterday assisted in the opening of a land corridor for the benefit of UNMEE. Good progress has been made to enable UNMEE to open an

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air corridor also. With regard to the moratorium on expulsions, this also is not a problem for Ethiopia. On the question of "... the immediate release and voluntary and orderly return of interned civilians" under ICRC auspices, Ethiopia does not have any civilian Eritreans interned. The Eritrean military personnel at the Didesa camp in Ethiopia which Eritrea refers to as "civilians" will be examined as part of the agreement on prisoners of war. Incidentally, ICRC had from the start of the conflict been given access to these and other Eritrean prisoners of war.

On the contrary, over 30,000 Ethiopian civilians (children, women, men) remain incarcerated all throughout Eritrea. ICRC and others, such as Ambassador Bogosian of the United States, have been given access to only a fraction of those interned. These Ethiopians find themselves in a grave and perilous condition and this is of urgent concern to Ethiopia. At no time are we aware that ICRC or Ambassador Bogosian have "ascertained", as claimed by Eritrea, the non-existence of concentration camps. Only today, the Ethiopian Embassy in Asmara issued a statement disclosing the rounding up of thousands of Ethiopians since 24 November 2000. The Embassy said, "The whereabouts of the latest group of Ethiopians arrested by the Eritrean police are as yet unknown". We call for the immediate and unconditional release of these Ethiopian civilians and their repatriation to their homeland under the aegis of ICRC.

Notwithstanding the above, and as part of confidence-building measures, we would like to add that one should also desist from falsely attributing action or actions to others and then claiming that these have been attested by credible institutions. A case in point is the allegation by Eritrea that Ethiopia had committed "gross violations of international law in the occupied territories". They cite a UNHCR press briefing given on 3 October 2000 as evidence. It is sad that a country like Eritrea, which is at least half Muslim, issues a statement referring to "... churches and mosques were looted of all the icons,". Muslims do not keep icons in their places of worship. The irony is that the original UNHCR press release, while not in any way whatsoever implicating a particular party with the looting and destruction in Omhager as the Eritrean side purports, associates the icons with the churches and not the mosques. (I have attached herewith the said UNHCR press release.)

Finally, I would like once again to reiterate that, for the Government and people of Ethiopia, the war which was forced on them by Eritrea is over. The real enemies for us are poverty and backwardness. As evidenced by the recently approved budget for the current fiscal year, our efforts and resources are once again geared to the track of development. Included in these efforts is the Government's decision to embark on the demobilization of the army. This is being done even before a final and comprehensive peace settlement has been achieved. We are doing it because we also believe it will help as a confidence-building measure. We call on Eritrea, a country of 3.5 million but with an army of some 300,000 troops, to do the same. The measure, when carried out by both countries, will be good for the whole region of the Horn of Africa.

On the even of the visit of the Secretary-General of the United Nations to Eritrea and Ethiopia, it is only fitting that both countries should show that they genuinely mean to carry out the Algiers Agreement on the cessation of hostilities, in letter and spirit. Ethiopia is ready to rise to the occasion.

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda items 114 (a) and (d), and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Abdulmejid **Hussein**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

UNHCR News - Press Briefing Note

Briefing Notes

Tuesday 3 October 2000

This is a summary of what was said by UNHCR spokesman Kris Janowski (to whom quoted text may be attributed) at today's press briefing at the Palais des Nations in Geneva.

- Eritrea

UNHCR officials who travelled to the border area of Eritrea recently vacated by Ethiopian troops found the area almost completely destroyed, thoroughly looted, depopulated and mined. The findings dashed hopes for a speedy return of the town's 7,000 inhabitants driven out by the recent war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The scope of destruction also cast doubt on the return of tens of thousands more people driven out from other areas not yet visited by UNHCR.

A team of UNHCR field workers, accompanied by partner agencies, travelled last week to the town of Omhajer, nearly 300 kms southwest of Eritrea's capital, Asmara. They were the first foreigners to visit the town since Ethiopian troops pulled back on September 21. The town, located in the southwest corner of Eritrea wedged between the Ethiopian and Sudanese borders, was once an important political, economic and military centre for Eritrea on the Setit River.

The team found all permanent structures and public buildings, including the city hospital and two schools, 80 percent destroyed. The roofs and all items of any value had been removed. All commercial buildings were completely looted.

The local mosque and one Orthodox church had been heavily damaged, with much of the roof of the mosque missing, and a fire apparently lit within the church. Everything of value had either been taken or destroyed, including the church's icons. The local military said since the Ethiopians pulled back one local man was killed by a land mine and 50 other mines had been cleared.

Many of the *tukuls* (traditional mud/wood/straw houses) have also been destroyed.

The Ethiopian troops, who held the area for three months, withdrew last month under a peace agreement signed by Ethiopia and Eritrea in Algiers last June.

The war drove some 100,000 Eritreans into neighbouring Sudan and displaced many more inside of Eritrea. About half of those in Sudan have since gone back. The war was also a setback for UNHCR's plans to return up to 160,000 Eritreans who had fled to Sudan during earlier conflicts.